

# Passages at the Experimental TV Center

*Artists make pilgrimages to a quiet place by the river in Owego NY where they can use ETC's electronic toolbox to create pixel visions. The lines to get in are long but the possibilities are alluring.*

SHALOM GOREWITZ

The Experimental Television Center (ETC) began in 1971 as a community video access center, but, a dozen years later has blossomed into America's premier high technology lab for artists, offering a unique set of tools to explore electronic imaging. Its residency program serves artists interested in composing work with analog-digital computers that manipulate the television signal and/or pixels. ETC's prototype computer graphic instruments were designed and constructed at the center as part of its continuing research program.

Ralph Hocking, the director of ETC, was dubbed the "video hermit" by Nam June Paik because his enthusiasm for technology was matched by his desire to work in conditions of reflective solitude. Hocking believes that the art form will not mature until artists have daily access to the tools, and is currently putting energy toward making colorizers, keyers, switchers, and other instruments available at low cost: "My goal is to develop individual artistic expression using electronic technology as the tools. All of my efforts and those of the people connected to the center are aimed toward getting individual studios constructed in order for individuals to create..."

When the center moved to Owego from Binghamton in 1979 its artist residency program was expanded and refined. The fulltime use of the system made possible a steady flow of processed images. According to Sherry Miller, codirector of ETC, all requests by artists with video experience who are qualified to work with the system are met. After initial instruction in the concept and technical structure of the system by program coordinator Peer Bode, the artist is expected to work alone. There is a \$5 per diem fee, plus a \$10 membership, and the space is used 24 hours a day. Artists usually sleep on cots next to the equipment. Hocking's goal is to get as many people as possible involved with the personal use of electronic imaging tools.

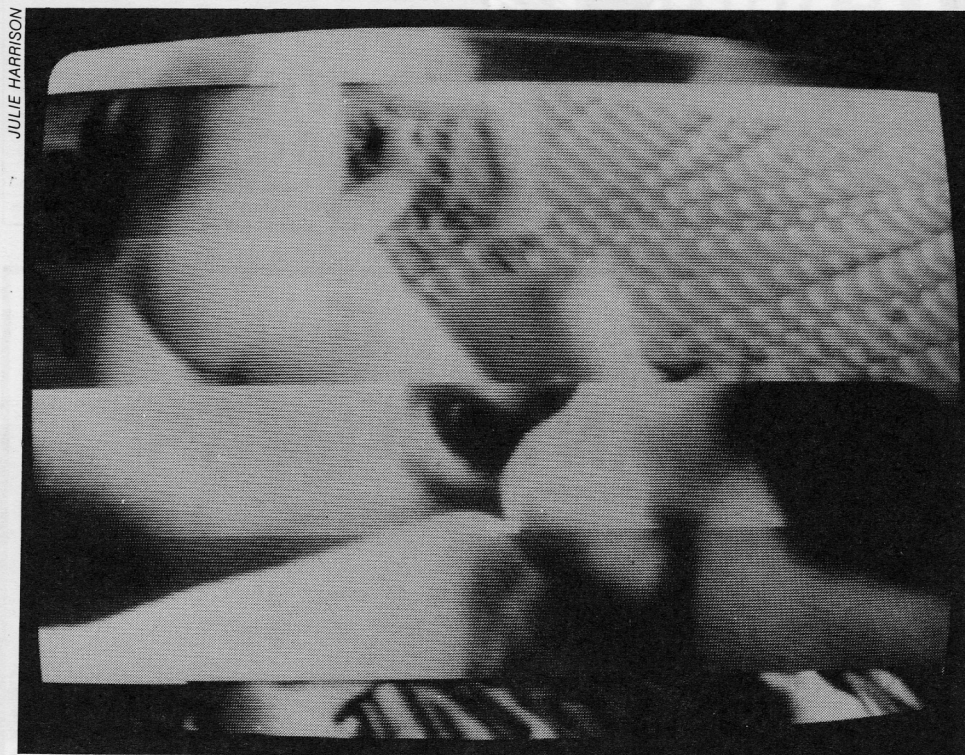
## MORE USERS = LESS TIME

The number of people using ETC jumped from 35 in 1982 to 50 in 1983, while funding has remained at the same level for three years.

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There's a sense of frustration for people working there. Julie Harrison, for instance, believes that work produced at the center gets redundant if people don't have extended access several times a year. "Half the time is usually

think that a facility funded and nurtured by public money will or should become a work space reserved for the few. Ideally, the New York State Council on the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and other founda-



Using equipment at the Experimental TV Center in Owego NY, Julie Harrison breaks up the images in her tape *Ere I Saw Elba*. Studied interference with a representational picture is only one of the ways artists deploy electronic tools.

spent rediscovering what I already know, the remaining time, often at the end of the session, I discover new things. But then I have to wait another six months to go up again. It's impossible to develop the potentials of the system." New users appear to average two sessions a year. It's possible during first residencies to create beautiful imagery but subtleness, craft and discipline evolve with repeated use. If the egalitarian structure of ETC is to be maintained, increased requests will mean even less time for those who have already made ETC an integral part of their work. It's not realistic to

tions supporting video art should recognize the need for more such facilities and also, when the time comes, will support artists attempting to acquire systems of their own.

## PILGRIMAGE TO OWEGO

The Experimental Television Center itself cannot be duplicated. The site, the quietness of Owego, the river glowing, flowing by the back window. The four-hour ride from NY is something of a pilgrimage. Changing season by season, the mountains are vast, inspirational,

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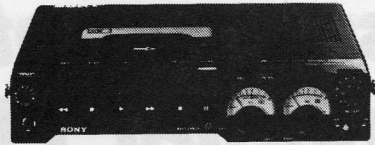
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and in the isolated studio concentration is extreme. ETC is a let-go system, encouraging a certain amount of randomness, an invitation to accident that requires patience, detachment, vigilance. Ralph Hocking is certain it's destined to fall apart one day. He stresses a non-business-like, casual approach: "The electronic tools are adapted for art; the art is grounded in a long history..."

The center's equipment evolved in tandem with the education and development of the image process artists who used it. A Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer was constructed for the center in 1971. Paik, Shigeko Kubota, Jackson MacLow, Rudi Stern, and Walter Wright were among the first to use the facility. It was further expanded by the addition of a four-channel colorizer in 1974 and a bank of keyers, sequencer, and oscillators in 1975, all designed by David Jones. Since 1975, Jones, Paul Davis, and others have been experimenting with a computer as control system for the analog modules and a generator of digital images.

In 1982, David Jones and ETC received a NYSCA coproduction grant to design and print the circuit boards needed to produce an updated generation of instruments. The end result will allow artists to construct their own systems. Currently, there are at least four other major image process systems actively being used by video artists: the Sandin, Hern, Rutt-Etra, and Beck. Their low-cost availability to artists and institutions may do for TV what Moog's synthesizer did for music. Jones estimates that machines will be available early next year. He is currently developing a frame buffer storage device that is "half as good as the Quantel" possibly for under \$2,000 that will allow real time digitization with up to 256x512 lines resolution.

### BIG BYTE OF THE FUTURE

Other new computer hardware and software will offer at much lower cost effects currently available at state-of-the-art studios such as Magi and Digital Effects. To produce real time animation, 32K bytes are needed: Colors, shapes, textures will vary with systems. Including basic video equipment (cameras, decks, monitors, etc.) there are now systems in existence that cost around \$25 to \$40,000, and

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come equipped with light pens, tablets, analog-to-digital converters, and video camera or genlock inputs. Programs include frame buffers, squeeze zooms, image compression, 3-D rotations and other effects associated with television postproduction. What's more, the prices are decreasing as the technology advances.

If everything goes well, Jones' system at ETC will soon be available on the open market for cooperative, personal or institutional use. Jon Burris is planning to build a Sandin Image Processor for Young Filmmakers that can be interfaced. Michael Rothbart says that IBM and other major companies will be releasing real time, user friendly software to control video images. IMAC [the huge screen system] has the basis for an excellent process facility. Luis Cancel has indicated interest in a computer graphic lab at the Bronx Museum. The availability of this equipment might stir the development of new analog digital prototypes. Perhaps facilities will become available to a

process video shows. The Kitchen publishes a series of catalogs of artists writing about their work.

If there is a general "process" aesthetic, it is remarkably varied considering the fact that the majority of artists working with computer and electronic imaging tools are connected to ETC. Consider the spectrum inhabited by such diverse artists as Barbara Sykes, Neil Zusman, Henry Linhart, Maureen Nappi, Doris Chase, Peter D'Agostino, Dan Reeves, Norman Pollack, and Reynold Weidenaar, to mention a few. The look tends to change as new equipment or computer software becomes available—and also according to individual practice. Electronic image processing is more than a convenient category of a technical style: It's a statement of intention rooted in the aesthetic traditions implied by "process," "synthesis," and visualization with light and color. The subject and transformative nature of much of the work is, if nothing else, a radical subversion of our expectations about TV.



With the help of the ETC synthesizer, Mimi Martin pulled a face out of shape in her piece called *Pappa: Tape 1*.

broad range of artists, approximating an electronic print shop where engineer/producers can help shape visions.

Tapes produced at the center show internationally in museums, galleries, schools, and over closed circuit, broadcast and cable television. There is an internship program and a library archive containing most of the electronically processed video produced since 1971. As for printed resources, Lucinda Furlong is currently writing a series of articles focussing on the aesthetic evolution of process video, the first of which appeared in *Afterimage* (Summer, 1983). Maureen Turim wrote and introduction ('81) and catalog ('82) for the State University of New York at Binghamton

"...possibly, the key techniques of our civilization are instrumentation based on the transformation of patterns based into their structural analogs through modulation of signals," prophesied Gyorgy Kepes in 1956 in *The Landscape of Art and Science*. ■

More information about ETC, applications, and (for \$10) the center's operating manual may be obtained from Sherry Miller, ETC, 180 Front Street, Owego, NY 13827, (607) 687-1423.

Video artist Shalom Gorewitz has been working at ETC since 1977. He is an assistant professor in the Contemporary Arts department at Ramapo College, NJ.

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